LIFE AFTER LIFE
John 11:1-7, 17, 34-44
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For two thousand years, at the graves of millions upon millions of men, women and children, in the very valley of the shadow of death itself, someone has stood up and read the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life...he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Jesus said those words to Martha, the sister of Lazarus. New Testament scholars agree that the statement is one of the most powerfully important in the Bible and have proceeded to write a veritable mountain of interpretative commentary on it.

One of the most intriguing commentaries I have ever read, however, was in an unlikely source, the Columbus Dispatch, January 4, 1978 - a feature article on the Senior Class Adviser at the Ohio State Medical School, Dr. William Havener. Dr. Havener is Chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at the Medical School and the article was a summary of his remarks to the Senior Class. It begins: "I am about to tell you the ultimate secret - the key to success, happiness and wealth beyond your dreams." That, I thought when I read it, is quite a promise. Success, happiness and wealth are the "holy trinity" of our culture: who could resist reading further? But, having captured my attention, the Doctor changed directions and became deadly serious. At the threshold of their careers he made a rather shoddy comparison between his would-be physicians and New York taxi drivers and prostitutes. He told the graduating seniors that statistics show that they were more likely to become drug addicts than a New York taxi driver, or to end their own lives by suicide than a New York prostitute. "As a matter of fact," he said, "you are more likely to destroy yourselves with drugs or suicide than almost anyone else is." And then he illustrated from his own experience: the prominent, skilled neurosurgeon, perfect example of what a physician should be, who one night went to his office and shot himself: the thirty year old anesthesiologist, attractive mother of two with a fine practice and beautiful blue eyes - in which Dr. Havener discovered one morning the pinpoint pupils of drug addiction and the end of her career.

The reason for the gloomy statistics, Dr. Havener suggested, is the reality of death: "all your patients are going to die," he reminded them. And if you can't find an answer to that, it will be very, very tempting to deal with it in some other way, such as drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, all of which are ultimately self-destructive. Although the Doctor was unaware of it, I'm sure, he was coming very close at this point to good New Testament theology. He was talking about the power of death. His secret was, essentially, that life is lived out in the presence of God and that real life is possible in the love of God: that when we forget that or stop believing it life rather quickly begins to look like the slow process of dying. 'Young men and women," he said, "do live your life as if there was a God of love who cares for you - and for each of your patients - because there is!" Dr. Havener understood that real life is possible only when one deals with death as a fact, but also as a power that threatens life. And he concludes that the love of God is the only way ultimately to do it.

We are both repelled and intrigued by death. We are infinitely curious about what is to become of us after death. The religions of the world have provided a shining array of answers for our comfort and edification. And recently, scientific inquiry into the phenomenon of dying has prompted a flurry of books and articles

on the subject. The most popular work is Raymond Moody's Life After Life, a presentation of case histories involving persons who nearly died, or were declared clinically dead, but revived to reflect and talk about the experience. The topic is open and whether or not we are dealing with an objective phenomenon is, at least for the time being, up to the individual to decide. Religion seems at times to focus on life after death at the expense of everything else. It is the ultimate concern, the prize all wish to earn. The Bible, I find, is interested, but only peripherally. Mostly the Bible is concerned about life in the here and now. The ultimate Biblical question is not "What happens when we die?" but "How shall we now live?" The testimony of the Bible - as was Dr. Havener's experience - is that once you resolve that one, the other matter resolves itself. That is to say, there is a quality of life available now that allows us to overcome death, and the power of death, even while we live.

That idea is very old. One of its more memorable expressions is found in the 37th chapter of the Book of the prophet Ezekiel; the vision of the Dry Bones. It was the Sixth Century B.C.: the people of Israel had lived for several generations as captives in Babylon. When the tragedy of their total defeat and humiliation happened, they were lined up in the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem, marched through the gates and across the desert - to their slavery in Babylon. Perhaps, on that trail of tears they walked through a valley battlefield, littered with the dry bones of their long dead warriers. It would have been a picture no one who saw it would ever forget. It summed up, somehow, that hopelessness of their situation. At the time the prophet wrote, the people were saying: "Our bones are dry, our thread of life is snapped, our web is severed from the loom." The prophet recalled that earlier, depressing image and used it as the framework for an astounding assertion. The bones will live: Israel will rise again from the ashes of this humiliation. You will be, once again, what God made you to be. You will have life as a people, and as individuals.

Well, that is exactly what happened. The people were set free and returned from death to life. Notice the subtlety of the prophet in using death as a metaphor - not simply the termination of physical life. Death is something that can begin and happen while one lives. Death is the denial of personhood; oppression, slavery. Death is a proud Jew living in Babylonian captivity. Death is whatever keeps you from being whatever you are. The power of death is whatever threatens full and joyful life now.

At the end of the Second World War a troop ship carrying fifteen hundred marines was sailing home. Several marines asked the Chaplain on board to lead a Bible study. Near the end of the voyage they read John II - our text this morning. The Chaplain suggested that the raising of Lazarus was an illustration of Jesus' words: "I am the resurrection and the life". After the group disbanded, one marine lingered. "Chaplain," he said, "everything we read this morning was pointed at me. I've been living in hell for the past six months." He told how he had gotten in serious trouble in Japan, although no one knew about it. But he felt terribly guilty. The closer he got to home the worse he felt. He couldn't face his family - his wife and children. And he said, "Up until today, Chaplain, I've been a dead man. I have felt utterly condemned by myself and by my family (if they knew) and by God. I've been dead, but after reading about Jesus and Lazarus, I know I am alive again."...The Chaplain knew that on that day, in the middle of the Pacific, "the miracle of the resurrection had taken place".

The Chaplain was Robert McAfee Brown and he uses the incident as introduction to his fine book, The Bible Speaks To You. He reflects: "The message of new life reached across the pages, grasped him, and transformed him...When people expose themselves to the message of the Bible, things begin to happen."

We have taken a most circuitous route to arrive at the text; intentionally, I might add. To mix my metaphors, the light shines so brightly here, you can be blinded if you are not careful. Jesus received a message from His friends Mary and Martha that their brother, Lazarus, was ill. By the time the message arrived Lazarus was dead two days. Jesus waited two more days, traveled to Bethany, talked with the sisters, wept, ordered the stone from the grave removed, called to Lazarus - "come out", and Lazarus did. Some people believed because of the incident; the politically astute, however, hightailed it for Jerusalem to call a meeting about how to deal with the man.

The scholars tell us that this story is the final sign in the Fourth Gospel: it points ahead to Jesus' own death and resurrection. It is a commentary on His words: "I am the resurrection and the life." But what really happened? That's the wrong question, of course, but it's the one we ask and I'm going to take a chance by sharing the two statements which constitute my answer. I don't know. And, it doesn't matter. The problem is that the NBC cameras weren't there, nor was the county coroner, nor was Raymond A. Moody, Jr. to interview Lazarus. The historic problem is that Lazarus fades into the background and is never heard from again. The literary problem is that John alone mentions the incident. The theological problem is that to say it happened just like that is to assert a literalism that is difficult to maintain at best, and misleading at worst: but to say it did not happen and could not happen is to superimpose constraints on Almighty God's freedom to do whatever He chooses to do.

But don't take it from me alone. Listen to two of my favorite Scotsmen. Arthur John Gossip:"It is stupid and futile to attempt to comment upon a passage so majestic and unfathomable, which indeed has the quality of music rather than of words...it suggests truths too deep and profound to be bluntly expressed in our stammering human speech." (Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8, p.643). And William Barclay: "There are certain miracle stories - and they are the most precious and important of all - which are not so much designed to tell us the story of a single incident, as to enshrine and embody an eternal truth...if it be insisted that such stories be taken with a crude and stubborn literalism, the greater part of their value and meaning is lost." (The Mind of Christ, p.85).

May I suggest that this story is like a goblet of the finest, most fragile crystal, of infinite value, but so terribly vulnerable to careless handling? May I suggest, respectfully, that modern Christianity is irrelevant until it learns the lost art of handling its pieces of crystal with great care; and that to insist on literalism here is to break the goblet? Again, Barclay says it with great wisdom and love: "There is little use in a Jesus who did things almost two thousand years ago, but who has ceased to do them now. What we need is a Christ who still does things. There is little relevance in a Jesus who raised a dead man to life in Bethany nineteen hundred years ago, but who never does that now; there is every relevance in a Christ who to this day daily raises men from the death of sin and liberates them to life eternal." (Ibid. p.87).

If we can move beyond the question of literalism, if we define death as the Bible does - as a kind of slavery, an oppressive power leaning in a direction away from true life, a reality that ensnares us and keeps us from being free, and therefore fully alive, the story of Lazarus takes on new and personal meaning. As Dr. Havener tried to tell the Medical students, there are many ways to die: there are many powers that restrict and inhibit and press in on us, smothering joy and life itself. William Stringfellow suggests that the power of death is whatever you sell out to: whatever you allow to determine who and what you will be. In his little volume, Free In Obedience, he observes that many of us sell out to "image": that image superimposed on us by others and gradually adopted by ourselves as authentic. That, he suggests, can be the power of death in life: it "demands that the person of the same name give up his life as a person to the service and homage of the image. And when that surrender is made, the person in fact dies, though not yet physically." (p.55).

Consider guilt, and how very much we are inclined to carry it around with us and live out of it. It is a form of death, Biblically speaking. It inhibits and denies and restricts. Paul Tournier tells the sad story of a man whose parents constantly forced him to choose between his childhood friends and themselves and who, in adulthood found himself immobilized by guilt every time he approached intimacy with another person. Some of our guilt is self-imposed. A psychologist friend of mine at Purdue University suggests that parents are plagued by guilt feelings about their parenting. We feel inadequate; we feel guilty if we get angry with our children, and we feel guilty when they misbehave. We feel guilty for disciplining, and guilty for not disciplining. Guilt, she maintains, more than anything else, prevents happy parenting. Her opening word to any group she addresses is always the same: "Relax. You're probably doing a better job than you give yourself credit for. Stop feeling guilty." And some guilt is real. Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we are mean and intentionally hurtful. Sometimes we get into big trouble and do something we end up regretting the rest of our lives. No one is immune from that: you don't have to be a felon to know what I mean. Everyone can recall a word or act that was wrong, and destructive and heartbreaking to those we love, something that happened ten or twenty years ago and for which we are everlastingly sorry. To live out of that guilt is a kind of death. When we are what our guilt requires, we are no longer fully alive. Unresolved guilt is the power of death in life.

Perhaps the most subtle and certainly one of the most powerful forms death can take is a peculiarly American phenomenon known as the "success syndrome". Middle class men particularly are under a compelling edict to succeed. If we aren't succeeding in some significant manner we begin to feel inadequate; we aren't worth anything: there is no purpose and meaning to our being alive. It's a kind of slow dying. Dr. Frank William, in his Lenten Lecture last Sunday evening, told the typical story of a young business executive who had accomplished all his goals at the age of forty. There were no more successes to achieve, no more heights to scale in his company. And he ended up in a psychologist's office, head in his hands, wondering why life was so dull and unexciting and unfulfilling. That, I think, is very real for middle America. We hang our self-worth, our self-esteem, our ability to live openly and joyfully on the tangible success symbols of American culture. And when they don't come as regularly and dramatically as they used to; when we don't get the raise or promotion, or fail to make the big sale, or aren't elected to the Board, something strange and deadly starts to happen inside. We have trouble getting up in the morning and going to sleep at night. We lose our appetite for life;

everything looks gray and sometimes we can't even love. That, I would suggest, is a form of death right in the middle of life, from which we desperately need to be delivered.

And finally, the power of death comes to each of us in days that are empty of meaning. Sometimes it is precipitated by the dying of someone very dear to us, or the end of a relationship, or simply a birthday which signals the relentless slipping away of time. We know what it means to experience death in its most familiar form:- boredom and a loss of any sense of wonder at the miracle of life and the incipient cynicism that accompanies it. We know the awful truth of that line out of Macbeth:

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death!"

Christian faith suggests, and believes, that Jesus Christ is powerful over death not simply as the termination of life, but more importantly as a force in the present.

The incredible claim of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ offers life: "life after life" if you will, Just as He gave it back to Lazarus, so He will give it to you and me, here and now.

The claim is big and majestic: you have to stretch even to hear it, and feel it, and approach it. He forgives. He wipes out the blots on the record. He releases us from guilt and says "God accepts you - please accept yourself and live." He gives back that self-worth we keep losing in life. He says "you are special to God: you are valuable and precious: you can even like yourself because God loves you." He gives back that precious wonder of the child, that wide-eyed exuberance in the midst of life's every day miracles. The Lord of Christian Faith cares about life in this world. He says, "live and live fully: listen and love and taste and feel and rejoice in this incredible life you have been given." And He abolishes fear. He says "I am the resurrection and the life...he who believes in me will never die."

Life after life is what He offers: the gift of real life. I invite you to claim it and live it. It's a matter of accepting Him: trusting Him: allowing Him to be your Lord - your Savior - your God. Perhaps the most important command in the Bible is what Jesus said to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out of there! Walk away from your death and live!"

We Presbyterians don't sing it much any more but the old Gospel Hymn says it all...

> "Just as I am, though tossed about
> With many a conflict, many a doubt,
> Fightings and fears within, without
> O Lamb of God, I come, I come!" Amen.

Our Father, we would live to the full extent of our humanity. We confess that there are many reasons why we don't. You know them all: You know our secret hearts. Grant us to hear and to believe the promise of life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.